1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER TWO

THE HOMES OF THE LEPCHAS

i

Zongu is a roughly triangular portion of very mountainous land, approximately forty miles on each side, bounded on the south-east by the river Teesta, on the north-east by the river Talung and on the third side by the mountains south of Kinchenjunga. The land is excessively precipitous; the rivers are at about 2,000 feet above sea-level and the average height of the hills is about 12,000 feet; but the peaks rise to more than double that height, Kinchenjunga at the head of the Talung valley, which dominates the western horizon, being over 28,000 feet. Except for a few artificially levelled places there is probably not a hundred square yards of flat ground in the whole district; and the tracks are too steep and too uneven for it to be possible to employ mules, let alone horses; all travelling has to be done on foot, and all goods transported by human porterage.

The river valleys are hot, steamy and somewhat malarious, and consequently there are no houses right on the river, though the ground is used for raising subtropical plants; there are however occasional houses about 500 feet higher up. Most of the houses and cultivated land are between 3,500 feet and 7,500 feet above sea-level, a relatively narrow band above the two rivers, though occasionally fields are made at even higher altitudes. Above the cultivated land is the forest in which wild produce is gathered, a decreasing amount of hunting done, and to which the cattle are sent up to pasture in the winter months. Above the forest level comes first the rhododendron forest, and then the snows, rarely visited except by hunters searching either for ibex and musk-deer or for the wild aconite which forms the basis of their arrow poison.

The climate of the Talung valley is excessively wet, even for the Himalayas; it is only in the autumn months—from the end of September to the end of November—that there is no rain.

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

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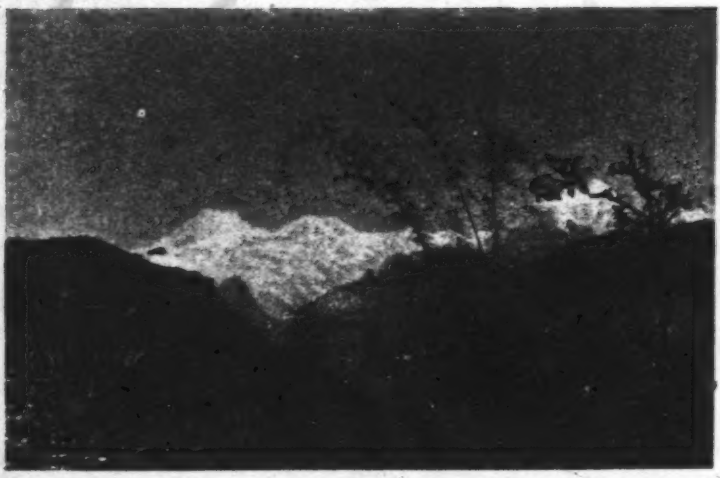

Above: TALUNG VALLEY LOOKING TOWARDS KINCHENJUNGA

Below: TALUNG VALLEY LOOKING EASTWARDS TOWARDS TIBET

[facing p. 76]

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

be rubbed over the body. Some men also carry a little arrow poison in a bag fastened inside their clothes over the heart. The greater number of people however do not take any of these precautions.

For the Lepchas devils are rather similar to the witches in European folklore; they are malevolent but not necessarily particularly intelligent; and there are numerous stories of devils being fooled by fairly simple devices, just as the witch was fooled in the story of *Hansel and Gretel*. There is no belief at all in ghosts or *revenants*; should the simulacrum of a dead person be seen it would be a devil in disguise. But although many people told me of having heard or seen devils, I did not hear a single story of any one seeing the dead or absent.

vii

This then is the landscape in which the rest of the book is set. To the south the hills rise steeply to an invisible crest; to the north the ground descends precipitously to the hidden Talung river, and then rises opposite even more steeply; behind the fairly barren hills are the peaks of Siniolchi and its eastern neighbours, jagged black rock topped with gleaming snow. At the western end of the Talung valley rises the stupendous mass of Kinchenjunga and its neighbouring peaks, Gods and the home of Gods. To the east are the green hills of Sikkim, and beyond the ragged snow-mountains which mark the frontier of Tibet.

For the European the landscape is one of overwhelming beauty, spoilt only by the very considerable difficulty of travelling about, so rocky and precipitous is the land. The picture I should like to convey is of a very steep and broken series of hillsides, except in small clefts nearly bare of big trees, but almost entirely covered with low growths of shrubs and saplings of various tints of green, flecked with patches of colour at some seasons; the yellow sweet-smelling daphne *edgeworthiana*, the blue hydrangea-like flower of *dichroa febrifuga*, the rich purple of the Sikkim rose. Here and there, scattered over the hillsides, are pieces of cleared and burned land, with the larger tree-trunks standing up lopped and charred; pieces of land placed in seemingly quite arbitrary positions, with large stretches of green between them. Down in the valley the ground appears slightly more cultivated; there are roughly terraced fields fenced with bamboo hurdles, and occasional small rectangles

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

of a deeper yellow-green where the cardamum grows. Scattered here and there among the prevailing greens may be seen the glow of a fruit-tree in flower, and nearby the low thatched roof of a house, barely distinguishable until you are close upon it. The paths are the faintest tracks, invisible until you come upon them; there is no main road, nothing to guide your way; except that there are usually more stones—for the bigger stones will have been removed from the neighbouring fields and piled on the path to make drier walking in the wet weather—there is little to indicate what is path and what merely rough ground. Overtowering and dwarfing all the works of man are the enormous ramparts of the gleaming snows, cutting short a quarter of the horizon in almost every direction. You can see that the land is in part cultivated and inhabited, but the part seems insignificant; in the battle between man and nature, nature seems everywhere the winner.

That is the landscape for the European; for the Lepcha not a single feature is the same. Except when they refer to them as the habitations of the high Gods, the Lepchas do not remember the mountains; they do not lift up their eyes, they look down on the ground. Every piece of land is meaningful for them, for every piece, unless it be the home of a supernatural, is, has been, or will be cultivated. They think and speak of their country as a poor country, demanding disproportionate labour for the food they require for themselves and their families. For them the land is not a friend; it is a material; and when they look at it they see therein the work and sweat they have fed it with all their lives. Every piece of land, every step they take, reminds them of the past and the present, of their own work and struggles, and those of their neighbours; the houses and fences they have helped to build, the land they have helped to clear and weed and harvest, the places where they have played as children, or, later, met for amorous encounter. They see too the cliffs and rocks and lonely trees where dwell the devils who menace and destroy their otherwise peaceful and happy existence; these visible signs remind them of those evil forces—disease and death, blight and famine, childlessness and enmity and quarrelling—that mar a life which, though hard enough, would otherwise be easy and friendly, full of health and happiness. The Lepchas do not see the landscape; they see the records of their lives, and of the lives of their ancestors, and of the lives to come of their children.

[p. 82 is blank]

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

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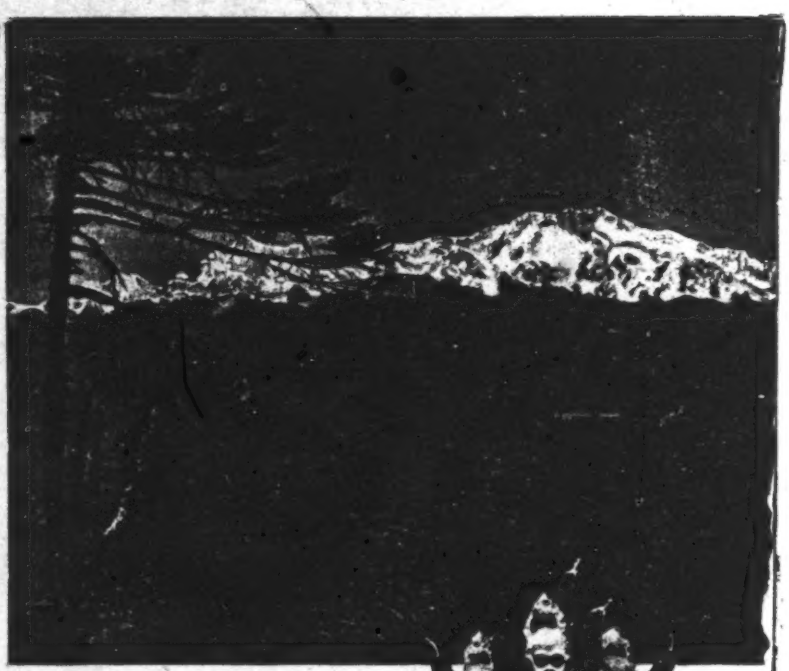

778
532

Kinchinjunga: the Mountain and the God.

[frontispiece]

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

000 "The Congress, which has refused office in six provinces where the party is in a position to form Ministries, observed a *hartal* to mark the inauguration of autonomy in the provinces.

"The *hartal* was observed in Calcutta by the closing of Hindu shops. A small minority of Moslem-owned shops were also closed.

"Public services continued as usual, but schools and offices under the control of the Calcutta Corporation were closed. No disturbances have been reported."

* * * * *

782 At almost the very moment when the Governor of Bengal
787 was administering the oath to his newly-appointed Ministers,
789 an old Lepcha woman was squatting on the ground in a remote valley in Sikkim, with an egg pressed against her forehead. This was the day of the *Cherim* ceremony, which is observed all over Sikkim twice in every year: once now, and again at the beginning of the winter. Its purpose is to find out what sickness is likely to trouble the village during the next few months and, since the Lepchas like to get as much benefit as possible out of any one celebration, also to keep
887 away hail. Kahlyeu, a gentle old man of nearly eighty, had previously made a rough altar of the branches of trees. It
133 faced up the valley in full sight of Kinchinjunga, the summit
48 of which is only twenty miles away as the crow flies, but for poor toiling man a journey of many painful days along the
137 roughest of paths, and through thick rhododendron forest, to
787 the lower slopes alone. On his roughly constructed altar
789 Kahlyeu now put a large brass tray in which were seven
778 cones of butter, four eggs (some said it should have been
782 three), one rupee, three small butter-lamps and a Tibetan
285 ceremonial scarf. The tray was placed on top of a plaited
415 bamboo winnowing-tray, on which was spread a piece of red cotton cloth. All this was an offering to the spirits who dwell
776 in the mountain, which the local people know only as Konchen. Before the eggs were placed in position Pom-ri, the old woman who was making the offering, placed each in

133

Looking east from the monastery. The central peak is Pauhunri, and the ridge of which it forms a part is the boundary between Tibet and Sikkim.

[facing p. 5]

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

as good as another. Although the two places are so near in terms of modern travel, in everything else Talung is thousands of years behind, looked at, that is, from what our unhappy machine-age (but actually slave-driven) civilisation is pleased to regard as progress. Talung has neither drains nor electric light; nor, more fortunately, any newspapers; but its inhabitants are happy and, all things considered, contented. A few, a very few, of the people had heard vague and distorted rumours of the Great War (that which did not end war): none, however, so far as I know, had heard of India's new constitution, nor even of King George the Sixth, and the day of the Coronation passed unnoticed, except in so far as it was a fine day and so permitted a full day's work in the fields.

My first view of the Talung was in the spring of 1936, on the way to Everest. We did not enter the valley since our road lay straight through Sikkim to the plains of Tibet, and there was no time for excursions off the route. But from Singhik bungalow one looks right up the valley to Kinchinjunga at its head, one of the most spectacular sights in the whole Himalaya. But on this occasion we did not see the mountain, which was hidden in cloud, and the valley itself looked grim and uninviting, with patches of winter snow still lying in the shadier parts of the higher slopes. When we returned in July the valley was deep in mist and filled with small clouds which looked like floating wads of cotton-wool; but even at this distance many shining patches of emerald cultivation were clearly visible on the steep hillsides, although we could see no villages.

During the previous autumn I had been staying in Nepal, hoping, amongst other things, to get permission to round off my ethnological studies of the people (which I had been pursuing intermittently for years) by a stay of some months in an actual Gurkha village. My proposals proved unacceptable to the Maharaja, who found it impossible to make any exception to the rule, laid down by his predecessors and never once relaxed, by which no European is permitted to

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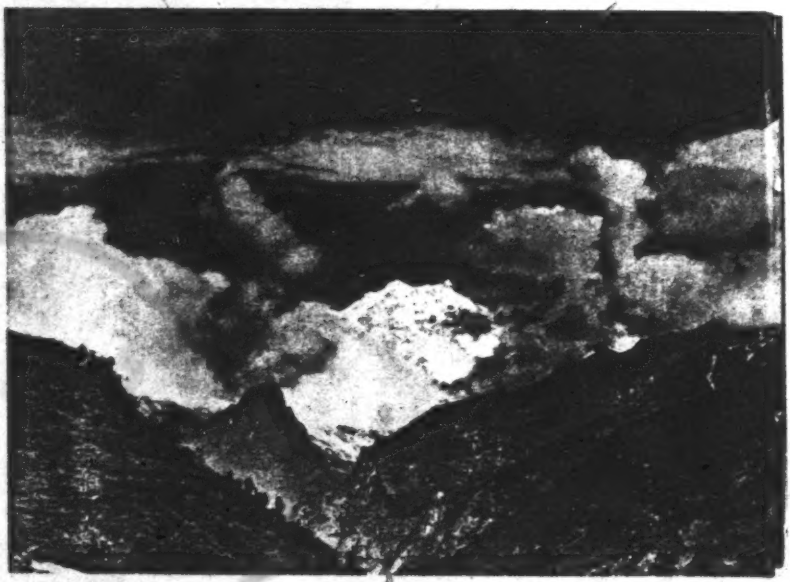
Lingtem Monastery.



Storm clouds over Kinchinjunga.

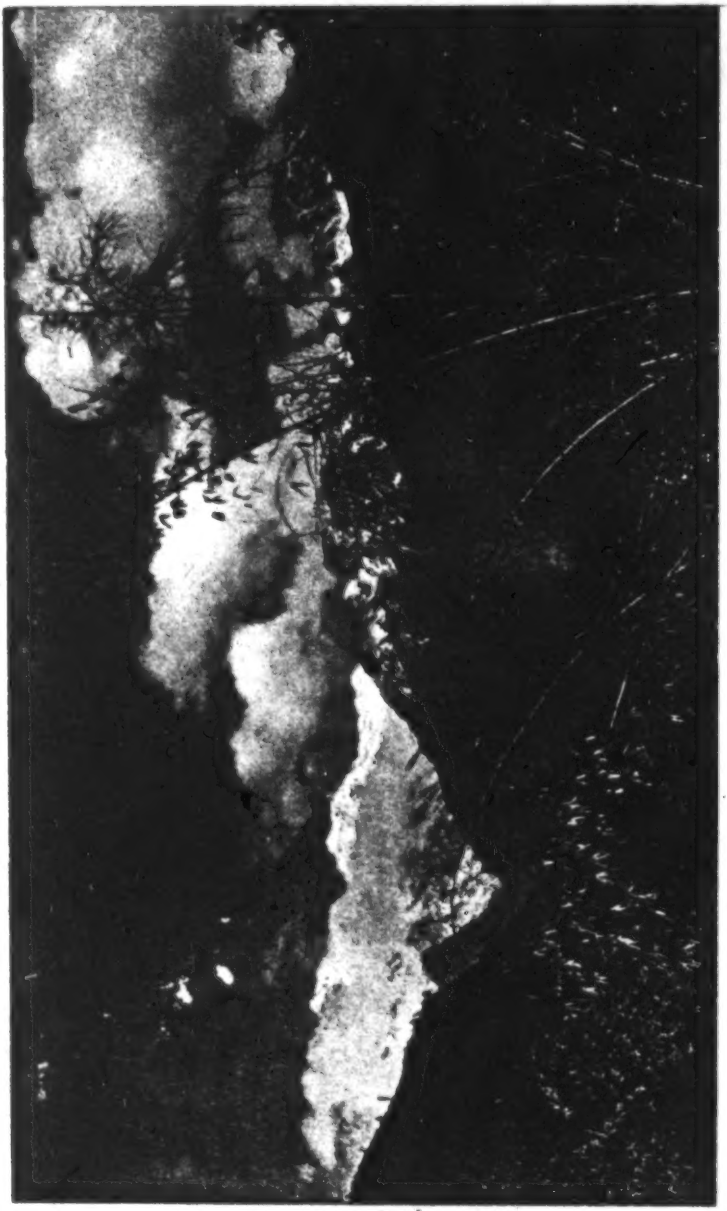
[facing p. 17]

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

untrammelled as I had been led to believe the Lepchas still did; and that if this were really true, I wanted to see where we, in our ignorance and haste, had made mistakes. Also, there might be some things in which we could help the Lepchas. We were neither of us doctors; but we had plenty of simple medicines and would do what we could. All we wanted was to live quietly in the village: to talk to people, and see how they ordered their lives. We would give no trouble; nor did we shoot or fish. Somehow I convinced him and he agreed that we might go. He would collect coolies to carry our baggage and we could start as soon as they had finished their meal. "Could we be ready by ten o'clock?" We could.

We dropped quickly down to the Teesta, crossed the iron suspension bridge, which was plentifully decorated with votive Buddhist flags, and had struggled to the top of the pass, called Sungphyok Hlo, which is the real entrance to the Talung, by midday. This low pass is formed by a ridge that runs at right angles to the main Talung Valley and is duplicated on the other side of the river which here runs through a small gorge. I was told that it was formed in this way.

Konchen is the lord of all the devils. His elder daughter is Chomo Hla Ri (Chomolari is on the edge of the Tibetan plateau and was climbed last year, for the first time, by Mr. F. Spencer Chapman), and his younger daughter is called Gongtuk Hlo, which is a ridge running down to the Teesta between Mangen and Singhik. Now the hill behind Lingtem is called Lungi Pano, or King Lungi, and he had a daughter named Sundem Pandi who was married to Sungphyok Hlo. The ridge opposite to Sungphyok Hlo is called Kahypo Hlo, and at one time these two were constantly quarrelling over the possession of King Lungi's daughter. Since they were unable to agree Konchen decided to put a stop to their quarrels, and so it was that he sent his daughter Gongtuk Hlo to part them. Gongtuk Hlo has remained there ever since; and thus the two have never been able to meet again.



Looking west from the monastery, with my favourite tree in the foreground, and Kinchinjunga in the background.

[facing p. 23]

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

888 at us with his rheumy eyes. His brain was too far gone to take in much of what was said and after making a remark, which was a sinister meaningless croak rather than human speech, he would totter off again to add a few more turns to his credit. He always reminded me of a desiccated old colonel: perhaps in some previous incarnation he had snored away long hours in some comfortable London club. Anyhow, I like to think so.

136 Lingtem Monastery has no permanent inmates. It does, however, harbour large colonies of rats and fleas. I thought at first that the nightly scufflings might be some form of psychic disturbance; and as for the fleas, once one had been thoroughly bitten they ceased to cause further annoyance.

133 The view from the monastery is, in my opinion, unparalleled anywhere in the Himalaya. The building faces due north, and directly in front of us, on the far side of the river, was a splendidly wooded ridge, the top of which was still under snow when we first arrived. Away to the left we had an uninterrupted view of the Kinchinjunga peaks, with the top of Seniolchum just visible a little to one side. This in itself was a sufficiently remarkable sight: but away to the right we also had a clear view of all the peaks forming the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet. In the centre of those was Pau-hunri, here called Nahrem Hlo, and thought [823] to be the loom of Nazong Nyu, a mythical personage who appears in many Lepcha stories.

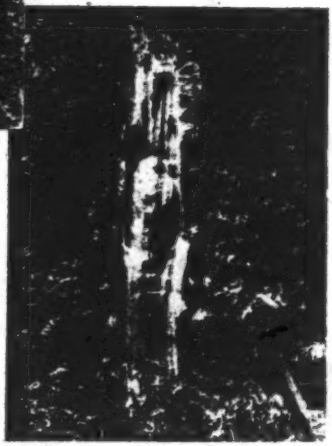
[788] Outside the monastery was a row of prayer-flags, and a 351 number of small prayer-drums had been let into one of the walls. These could be turned by the pious whenever they circled round the building. A little below was a small bamboo grove, which contained one particularly handsome tree, which I would sometimes watch for hours at a stretch, [322] especially when the weather was stormy. Why, I wondered, [137] do we use the wood of this most beautiful of all trees to make the most hideous of all furniture? The Lepcha uses a great deal of bamboo in one way and another, but in his hands the finished product never looks shoddy and ugly. On

136

Tree fern.

133

Hillside in Sikkim.



Waterfall in the Talung.

[Facing p. 31]

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

159 Pargeut's mother is the Umzet of the Inebus. A shrivelled-
[104] up old woman, she was chiefly remarkable for a huge pendulous goitre, which flapped from her neck like a half-deflated bladder. She seldom attended the services, but used occasionally to bring her granddaughter, whom we were
[753] treating for boils. These she said were caused by a demon which was sitting on top of one of the marriage gifts when it was brought to the house. Although many ceremonies had been performed the boils remained, and even increased in number, and the aged Inebu could never understand why they started to disappear as soon as Geoffrey commenced to treat them. I remember once, shortly before we left, being suddenly awakened at dawn by the wailing of conch-shells, sounded from the terrace outside. It was a pouring
[763] wet morning; but she had clambered sorrowfully up through the dripping forest to have the death of her youngest granddaughter, a baby of two, announced to the village. I never saw her again.

* * * * *

Old Hlatam, the mother of Aga, has never advanced beyond the lowest rank of Inebu. But she was a regular
[788] attendant at the monastery and an inveterate turner of prayer-wheels, being seldom seen without one in her hand.
159 She has the reputation of being a poisoner; but it had never
754 occurred to the others that this was a somewhat strange occupation for a female religious. She is believed to have caused the death of six people up to date, as a result of which she is much feared by most of the villagers, who take care not to eat or drink at her hands. It is thought that she keeps the poison in a small copper box, and that she obtained it from the plains. Incidentally, when the people
● [133] here talk of the plains they generally mean Darjeeling, which, although 6000 feet above the sea, and exceedingly hilly, compared with Lingtem might almost be regarded as level. It is said that owners of poison must abstain permanently from meat and alcohol; so be warned, reader,

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

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Typical Lepcha homestead.

241
291

Sowing dry rice.

342
356
417
291

Re-thatching a house.

[facing p. 172]

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

● 133
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[end map (A)]

133
361
131

[end map (B)]

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854
AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER V.

View from Mr. Hodgson's of range of snowy mountains—Their extent and elevation—Delusive appearance of elevation—Sinchul, view from and vegetation of—Chumulari—Magnolias, white and purple—Rhododendron Dalhousiæ, arboreum and argenteum—Natives of Dorjiling—Lepchas, origin, tradition of flood, morals, dress, arms, ornaments, diet—cups, origin and value—Marriages—Diseases—Burial—Worship and religion—Bijoosa—Kampa Rong, or Arratt—Limboos, origin, habits, language, &c.—Moormis—Magras—Mechis—Comparison of customs with those of the natives of Assam, Khasia, &c.

●133
114 The summer, or rainy season of 1848, was passed at or near Dorjiling, during which period I chiefly occupied myself in forming collections, and in taking meteorological observations. I resided at Mr Hodgson's for the greater part of the time, in consequence of his having given me a hospitable invitation to consider his house my home. The view from his windows is one quite unparalleled for the scenery it embraces, commanding confessedly the grandest known landscape of snowy mountains in the Himalaya, and hence in the world.* Kinchinjunga (forty-five miles distant) is the prominent object, rising 21,000 feet above the level of the observer out of a sea of intervening wooded hills; whilst, on a line with its snows, the eye descends below the horizon, to a narrow gulf 7000 feet deep in the mountains, where the Great Rungeet, white with foam, threads a tropical forest with a silver line.

[p. 122]

* For an account of the geography of these regions, and the relation of the Sikkim Himalaya to Tibet, &c., see Appendix.

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854
AK5 Lepcha AK5

To the north-west towards Nepal, the snowy peaks of 133
Kubra and Junnoo (respectively 24,005 feet and 25,312 feet) rise over the shoulder of Singalelah; whilst eastward the snowy mountains appear to form an unbroken range, trending north-east to the great mass of Donkia (23,176 feet) and thence south-east by the fingered peaks of Tunkola and the silver cone of Chola, (17,320 feet) gradually sinking into the Bhotan mountains at Gipmoochi (14,509 feet).

The most eloquent descriptions I have read fail to convey to my mind's eye the forms and colours of snowy mountains, or to my imagination the sensations and impressions that rivet my attention to these sublime phenomena when they are present in reality; and I shall not therefore obtrude any attempt of the kind upon my reader. The latter has probably seen the Swiss Alps, which, though barely possessing half the sublimity, extent, or height of the Himalaya, are yet far more beautiful. In either case he is struck with the precision and sharpness of their outlines, and still more with the wonderful play of colours on their snowy flanks, from the glowing hues reflected in orange, gold and ruby, from clouds illumined by the sinking or rising sun, to the ghastly pallor that succeeds with twilight, when the red seems to give place to its complementary colour green. Such dissolving-views elude all attempts at description, they are far too aërial to be chained to the memory, and fade from it so fast as to be gazed upon day after day, with undiminished admiration and pleasure, long after the mountains themselves have lost their sublimity and apparent height.

The actual extent of the snowy range seen from Mr. Hodgson's windows is comprised within an arc of 80° (from north 30° west to north 50° east), or nearly a quarter

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854
AK5 Lepcha AK5

●133 of the horizon, along which the perpetual snow forms an unbroken girdle or crest of frosted silver; and in winter, when the mountains are covered down to 8000 feet, this white ridge stretches uninterruptedly for more than 160°. No known view is to be compared with this in extent, when the proximity and height of the mountains are considered; for within the 80° above mentioned more than twelve peaks rise above 20,000 feet, and there are none below 15,000 feet, while Kinchin is 28,178, and seven others above 22,000. The nearest perpetual snow is on Nursing, a beautifully sharp conical peak 19,139 feet high, and thirty-two miles distant; the most remote mountain seen is Donkia, 23,176 feet high, and seventy-three miles distant; whilst Kinchin, which forms the principal mass both for height and bulk, is exactly forty-five miles distant.

On first viewing this glorious panorama, the impression produced on the imagination by their prodigious elevation is, that the peaks tower in the air and pierce the clouds, and such are the terms generally used in descriptions of similar alpine scenery; but the observer, if he look again, will find that even the most stupendous occupy a very low position on the horizon, the top of Kinchin itself measuring only 4° 31′ above the level of the observer! Donkia again, which is 23,176 feet above the sea, or about 15,700 above Mr. Hodgson's, rises only 1° 55′ above the horizon; an angle which is quite inappreciable to the eye, when unaided by instruments.*

This view may be extended a little by ascending Sinchul, which rises a thousand feet above the elevation of Mr. Hodgson's house, and is a few miles south-east of

* These are the apparent angles which I took from Mr. Hodgson's house (alt. 7300 feet) with an excellent theodolite, no deduction being made for refraction.

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854
AK5 Lepcha AK5

Dorjiling: from its summit Chumulari (23,929 feet) is 133
seen to the north-east, at eighty-four miles distance, rearing its head as a great rounded mass over the snowy Chola range, out of which it appears to rise, although in reality lying forty miles beyond;—so deceptive is the perspective of snowy mountains. To the north-west again, at upwards of 100 miles distance, a beautiful group of snowy mountains rises above the black Singalelah range, the chief being, perhaps, as high as Kinchinjunga, from which it is fully eighty miles distant to the westward; and between them no mountain of considerable altitude intervenes; the Nepalese Himalaya in that direction sinking remarkably towards the Arun river, which there enters Nepal from Tibet.

The top of Sinchul is a favourite excursion from Dorjiling, being very easy of access, and the path abounding in rare and beautiful plants, and passing through magnificent forests of oak, magnolia, and rhododendron; while the summit, besides embracing this splendid view of the snowy range over the Dorjiling spur in the foreground, commands also the plains of India, with the courses of the Teesta, Mahanuddee, Balasun and Mechi rivers. In the months of 133
April and May, when the magnolias and rhododendrons are 137
in blossom, the gorgeous vegetation is, in some respects, not to be surpassed by anything in the tropics; but the effect is [132]
much marred by the prevailing gloom of the weather. The white-flowered magnolia (*M. excelsa*, Wall,) forms a predominant tree at 7000 to 8000 feet; and in 1848 it blossomed so profusely, that the forests on the broad flanks of Sinchul, and other mountains of that elevation, appeared as if sprinkled with snow. The purple-flowered kind again 137
(*M. Campbellii*) hardly occurs below 8000 feet, and forms an immense, but very ugly, black-barked, sparingly branched

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

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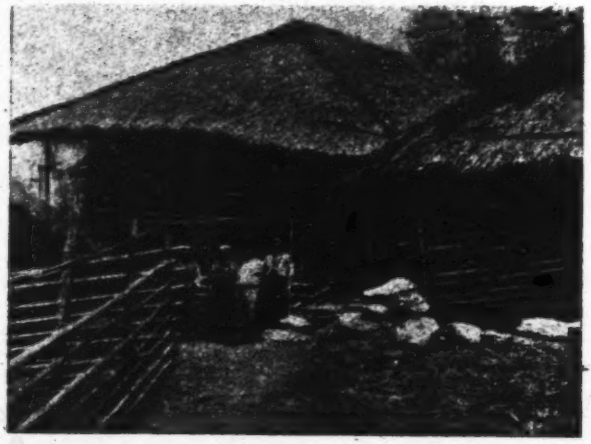

31. Lepcha house with stores

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32. Fenced Lepcha settlement

[End Plate 12]

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

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39. Lepcha girl cutting bamboo

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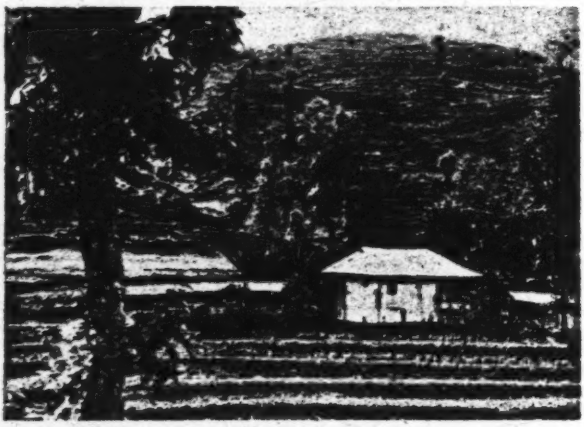

40. Cultivations of the Rai

[End Plate 16]